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ABSTRACT

This paper recounts the personal creative experiences of an author/illustrator of picture books for children. In the paper the author/illustrator tells how he works: he gets the words into a more or less finished form before starting to draw the pictures, and then moves on to a process of elimination and continual return to the text. The paper also discusses using "found" texts, or stories that are already in existence, such as nursery rhymes. The author/illustrator's picture book "The House That Jack Built" (1999) is used to show the creative process that is employed, and excerpts from an interview are reproduced to explain a particular page in the picture book. (NKA)

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by Gavin Bishop

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GAVIN BISHOP

PUTTING IT TOGETHER - MAKING A PICTURE BOOK

SESSION TALK–18thWORLD CONGRESS, AUCKLAND 12th July, 2000

I have been writing and illustrating picture books for the New Zealand and international market for the last 20 years.
I trained as an artist at the Canterbury University School of Fine Arts in Christchurch, N.Z. in the mid 1960's. When I graduated with honours in painting, I thought that I would become a painter. I did paint and exhibit for a while, but in 1978, a chance comment from a fellow art teacher, inspired me to write my first picture book.
Since that time I have become more and more intrigued with the picture book genre. I will never exhaust all the ideas that I would like to try in a picture book. One of the things that keeps me going is the challenge to get it right. Whenever I have a book published I can't wait to start the next one to see if I can do it better the next time.

In the literary world, as in the world of art, picture books are often relegated to an inferior position. Writing and illustrating a picture book for children is not seen to be as important as writing something for adults.
It seems ridiculous, but a definite hierarchy exists in the world of literature and art.
Why can't picture books be seen as a particular genre -
no better or worse than any other literary form? They are different that's all and like other literary forms such as poetry or novels for adults, they have their own conventions, traditions and a specific audience.

Well, picture books are certainly my medium. That's what I like to do and it's what I do best.

Some try to insist that picture books are an art form, but actually I think of a them as works of literature.
Works of literature, where the pictures take on a role similar to that of the words. That is, they tell a story in combination with the text.
This answers the debate over whether the words in a picture book are more important than the pictures. I think the most important thing in a picture book is the story. And the story in a picture book should be told using words and the pictures. Those who think that the words are the most important part of a picture book are missing the point. The pictures and the words should be inseparable.
I began writing picture book stories, when I realised that by doing so I could have complete control of a book and would not have to illustrate other people's ideas that I might not find particularly interesting.
I believe that the ideal creator of the pure picture book is someone who is both author and illustrator. I certainly like to do both. There are lots of examples where writers and illustrators have worked very successfully together. But the few times that I have illustrated a picture book for a writer, I have not found it as satisfying as when I do both parts myself. I think you get a better end result if you control and create the whole project.
Most writers who are not illustrators tend to over-write when writing a picture book text and become very protective of their words.

Usually when putting a picture book together I get the words into a more or less finished form before starting to draw any pictures. I do this because it just makes sense to get an idea of the amount of room the words will need on each page before designing the pictures.
Then the whittling starts. Most of my writing and illustrating seems to consist of a process of elimination. As I design the pictures and decide upon the information that I want to include, I continually return to the text and reassess it. If I start to double up and repeat ideas I change the text. You

must never be saying the same thing – illustrating exactly what you have written.
Maurice Sendak says, "it's a kind of juggling act. It takes a lot of technique, a lot of experience, to keep the rhythm going between word and picture. A picture book has to have that seamless look to it when it's finished. One stich showing and you've lost the game."

Sometimes instead of writing my own stories I use "found" texts. Stories that are already in existence.
For me one of the best kinds of a "found" text is a nursery rhyme. These have been honed to perfection over the centuries through endless re-tellings. All the fat has been rendered off leaving lots of room for the illustrator. There is much more that the illustrator can invent because the text is so spare and lean.
To illustrate what I mean, I would like to spend the rest of this session looking at how I put together my version of THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT. (ISBN 1-86943-434-X, Scholastic NZ Ltd, 1999)

This accumulative rhyme has been popular for more than 200 years and has been parodied more than any other nursery rhyme. And like many other nursery rhymes probably began life as a political or social satire. Some say that it's form may have even developed from a Jewish chant, HAD GADYA first printed in Prague in 1590.
There are many equivalents to the rhyme in most European languages.
The rhyme as we know it, is first found in NURSE TRUELOVE'S NEW-YEAR'S-GIFT printed for John Newbury c. 1750.

The rhyme has attracted the attention of both scholars and cranks, and at least two whole publications have been devoted to its significance.
As well as being used as a children's nursery rhyme, THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT has provided themes for pantomimes, plays and even sheet music.
A great number of political parodies of the rhyme have been written –

THE POLITICAL HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT 1819, THE REAL OR CONSTITUTIONAL HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT 1819, THE ROYAL HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT 1820 and the satire on Queen Caroline which was also published in 1820 called THE POLITICAL QUEEN THAT JACK LOVES. In the same year appeared THE CHRISTIAN HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT BY TRUTH ON A ROCK.
About the same time saw the appearance of THE QUEEN AND THE MAGNA CARTA OR THE THING THAT JACK SIGNED.
THE CRYSTAL PALACE THAT FOX BUILT was published in 1851 and THE HOUSE THAT PAXTON BUILT, BEING A PEEP AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE, 1855.
And in 1862 there was a piece published that I think sounds very interesting, called-
AN ATTEMPT TO SHOW THAT OUR NURSERY RHYME, THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT, IS AN HISTORICAL ALLEGORY.
So you see that what I have done with this rhyme is certainly not new.

There are quite few modern interpretations of the rhyme too.
THE HOUSE THAT CRACK BUILT by Clark Taylor, THE WORLD THAT JACK BUILT by Ruth Brown and THE BOOK THAT JACK WROTE by Jon Scieska are some that come to mind.

SLIDES (Illustrations from my book)

To make sense of the following the reader ideally needs to refer to a copy of THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT (ISBN: 1-86943-434-X, Scholastic NZ Ltd, 1999)
Unfortunately the book is presently unavailable, in the U.S.A. It can be obtained however from Scholastic NZ Ltd., Private Bag 94407, Greenmount, Auckland 1730, New Zealand or through their website.

Like some of the others already mentioned, my version of HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT is a pseudo-history book that retells a nursery rhyme. Historical accuracy has been sacrificed to enable the telling of several layers of story.

It's also a rhyme that I've carried with me from childhood. Still after all these years I find it difficult to see it clearly with out the associations formed in my mind when I was a kid" The man all tattered and torn" and his relationship with "the maiden all forlorn" for example has always made me feel uncomfortable. "What's going on there?" I used to wonder. I instinctively knew, even as a very young child that the mood in that scene was dark and erotic.

Much of the way in which I respond to this rhyme is emotional and intuitive. Reason takes a second place. For me this is the best kind of material to work with. It doesn't pay to think about things too much when you are involved on a project. It is easy to kill.

I had wanted to "do" a House That Jack Built for many years but the time never seemed right, until I was living in Boston in 1996. I sat down one day and the concept for the book tumbled out in story board form in the space of a couple of hours. Very few changes, and no major ones, were made to it at all.

Cover-
Captain James Cook's journeys to New Zealand – stage productions.

Endpapers-
Hogarth's Gin Lane and The Rake's Progress.

Pages 2 &3
Fanciful map / early attempts to put Maori into a written form.

Pages 4&5
Papatuanuku dominates. Pantheistic spirituality fills the scene. Creation story.

6

Excepts from a Gavin Bishop Interview where this page is discussed.

Why is there a face suspended in the air?
This is the face of Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother, the giver of life to all things.

Why are there eyes all over the sky?
These eyes belong to the various atua/gods that protect or represent various natural forces. Everything in nature is personified and recognised by the Maori as a spiritual force. The eyes are watching Jack.

Why does Jack's house have a red door?
The door is red to make it stand out. It is also red, (a colour not available as a pigment to the Maori) to symbolise the foreign culture from which it comes. It also anticipates the violence which will erupt at the end of the book as a consequence of Jack's ignorance.

What are the Maori symbols in the corners and what do they stand for?
The Maori images in the corners of the page represent some of the atua/ gods that are mentioned in the legend running around the edges of the page.

- **The first face is Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother.**
- **The second face, (top right hand corner), is Ranginui the sky god, (hence the stars).**
- **The next face is one of their children, Tangaroa the sea god.(bottom right hand corner.**
- **The last figure is Tane Mahuta the god of the forests who separated Papatuanuku and Ranginui by standing on his head and pushing the sky father away with his feet.**

Is Jack wise to cut down the vegetation?

No. The Maori would not have cut down a tree without first asking permission of Tane Mahuta, the forest god or perhaps the atua of the tree itself. Jack is blissfully unaware of the enormous blunder he has made.

What else should we notice in this picture?
Jack's world is naturalistically drawn in brown ink in a way that a European artist of the time might have drawn it. The Maori world is drawn symbolically in a very stylised way in blue ink. This system of representing the world of the Maori and that of the Pakeha is continued throughout the book. Red/brown ink is used to express the voice of the Maori- their understanding of the world and their reactions to the enormous changes after the arrival of the British.

SLIDES CONT.

Pages 6&7
Trading/ commercial view of the world/ledger page. The Maori are anxious to have the wonderful new things that Jack has brought from his world. The Maori are unaware that there is a big price to pay for these things.

Pages 8 &9
The first cow is seen by the Maori as a Taniwha - a mythical creature of mixed blessings as explained in the border of the illustration.

Pages 10 &11
Trader Jack's open for business. More and more Maori are keen to trade for Jack's goods.

Pages 12 &13

The maiden all forlorn. The young Maori woman is reluctant to milk the cow. Her mixed feelings may be explained by the fact that New Zealand has no large native animals, except for those in the sea like whales and seals. In the background of this picture another "cow" is being dissected on the beach by European whalers.

Pages 14 &15
Muskets are eagerly sort after by the Maori. The acquisition of these lead to the inter-tribal Musket Wars of the early 1800's.

Pages 16 &17
Man all tattered and torn is portrayed as a whaler. By the very nature of his occupation he is a rapist. He comes from slaughtering whales to force his advances on the maiden all forlorn. In the background, seals are being clubbed to death by Europeans for their skins and oil.

Pages 18 &19
European settlers begin to arrive in greater numbers. More and more land is needed, but in many places the Maori are reluctant to give it up. Tensions are building.

Pages 20 & 21
The priest all shaven and shorn. The spread of Christianity. The background on the left hand page is based on a page from Hongi Hika's (a famous North Island chief) copy book. He was taught to write by Rev Kendall, an early missionary.

Pages 22 & 23
Christmas Day in Jack's town. Papatuanuku's presence in the sky is very weak indeed.

Pages 24 & 25
The cock that crowed in the morn symbolises the impact of exotic plants and birds on the native ones.

Pages 26 & 27
Jackstown is growing even more rapidly.

Pages 28 & 29
As the farmer sows his corn Maori war canoes are speeding into the harbour.

Pages 30 & 31
War!

Pages 32 & 33
Papatuanuku, the earth mother, rises once more. The Land Wars rage throughout the land.

Endpapers
Summary of the final events of the book.
A look at the where things are now.